

The Frontiers of Diplomacy

Charles Crawford

Ambassador of the United Kingdom to the Serbia and Montenegro, Belgrade

When I joined the Foreign Office in 1979 my first ‘hard language’ was Serbo-Croat. This was a shock. I had to find out where Yugoslavia was. I arrived here as Press Officer in January 1981. The Embassy was agitated. On the previous day there had been “disturbances” in Priština. Was this the start of the break-up of Yugoslavia following the death of Tito in 1980?

I followed your politics until mid-1984. LCY leaders would not meet the British Ambassador. They insisted on “party-to-party” contacts with the UK Communist Party. I once visited the Central Committee building. Draža Marković was in the lift. Exciting!

I talked to journalists and academics who would talk to me. I visited Kosovo in mid-1981, one of the first diplomats to do so after the state of emergency was lifted. I was Olympic Attache in Sarajevo for the Winter Olympic Games in 1984. That was when I met Nenad Kecmanović, who subsequently was mercilessly attacked for associating with British spies. Otherwise not much happened.

Like everyone else you had problems. But unlike everyone else you had no mechanism to solve your problems.

The established wisdom in the West was that Yugo-Communism kept nationalism under control. I argued that it was the other way round. Contradictions in your system were inciting nationalism. The republic and province centres of power played the nationalist card as the economy spiraled down.

Communist propaganda badly distorted Western thinking. In those days it was actually British policy not to talk to anti-Communist dissidents. This was seen as destabilising the fragile post-Tito situation. Nora Beloff and others in London complained that this position was spineless. We should engage with democratic forces in Yugoslavia as elsewhere in the Communist world. I was sent off to “talk to dissidents”. Even then I was not allowed to talk to Milovan Đilas. But I did meet Srđa Popović, who was impressed how Western capitals valued Yugoslavia’s role in the non-aligned movement. He said the whole thing was a pack of cards waiting to fall down. I walked along Užička street with Dobrica Ćosić. He said that Kosovo was like a cancer for Serbia. “Better to cut off the leg and save the body”.

Those ideas seemed radical in Western capitals. Cold War logic dominated everything. Communism had become like bad weather. A nuisance, but nothing could be done about it.

Apart from a short personal visit to Belgrade in mid-1985, I did not set foot in former Yugoslavia until April 1996, when I visited post-war Sarajevo for a quick visit before starting there as Ambassador in June.

After leaving Belgrade I worked as Geoffrey Howe’s speech-writer. I spent 1987 to 91 in South Africa closely following the end of the apartheid system in South Africa.

I have greatly enjoyed the ravings of “Publika” newspaper about my meeting with Nenad Kecmanović on a splay in Belgrade in autumn 1998. In fact I was on the beach in Cape Town!

I returned to London in mid-1991 as Deputy in Soviet Department, just in time for the collapse of the Soviet Union that August. I was sent to Moscow in mid-1993. I worked closely with the Russians on the Yugoslavia crisis. The British position on former Yugoslavia in key respects was closer to the Moscow view than the Washington view.

London's relations with Washington were as bad as they ever had been since WWII. Vladimir Ivanovski, now Russian Ambassador here, was one of my Russian colleagues then. He also had been in Belgrade in the early 80s. He was a communist, I was a capitalist. We weren't allowed to speak to each other!

After Moscow I returned to this region in 1996 and spent 2 years in Sarajevo trying to get the Dayton Accords moving. This was exhausting. The Foreign Office sent me to Harvard University to cool down. So I missed Rambouillet and the NATO bombardment. Robin Cook asked me to head the London policy team for this region immediately afterwards.

I worked to help the democratic cause in Belgrade. Žarko Korać, Predrag Simić and Goran Svilanović by chance were in London when news broke of Milošević's decision to go for elections. I told them that I thought HMG would support Koštunica if the democratic camp mobilised behind him. I told the Foreign Office morning meeting of top diplomats that Milošević had called elections; there was a good chance he would lose. They laughed. I was meant to be the Balkan expert – didn't I know that Milošević always won?

After Milošević fell they were suitably apologetic. They asked me if I would to return to Belgrade as Ambassador. Should I work on the problem from a flat in central London, or a house with a swimming pool here in Belgrade? I took the difficult option.

Thus since 1981 I have risen from well-deserved junior diplomatic obscurity to Ambassador level. I am attacked in Balkan newspapers as everything from an unbalanced Serbian nationalist gibanica-eater to the master-spy of British Balkan intrigue.

Just for the record I have seen or heard four reasons why I am leaving Belgrade:

- I am being pulled out because of links to cigarette smuggling
- I have had a fight with US Ambassador Montgomery
- I have been punished by the Foreign Office for stopping humanitarian aid to Serbia, as a protest against the Serbian government's treatment of B92
- London was angry that I tried to choose Zoran Đinđić's successor behind their backs.

What happened was this. I was asked in January if I would put my name forward as a candidate for HMA Warsaw, a big job in British diplomacy with Poland set to join the EU next year. I was chosen for this position soon afterwards, a great honour. Normal FCO procedure. Balkan fantasists who speculate that there is something "behind" any Ambassador's departure can never be wrong. Sooner or later every Ambassador leaves!

Apart from my time in South Africa I have spent my professional life following the situation here. As I leave Belgrade I am happy to share with you some personal Big Picture reflections on my experiences. These are not official policy pronouncements: you can find them on the Internet.

My theme today is "The Frontiers of Diplomacy". I want to talk about 3 frontiers:

- the Policy frontier
- the Practical frontier
- the Psychological frontier.

The Policy Frontier

All countries apart from “failed states” – a new, dangerous phenomenon – have domestic policies. Those policies are more or less under their own control.

Foreign policy is different. It is all about getting people and countries who are not under your control to do things they might not like. “Big powers” are said to have mechanisms for exerting pressure on ‘small’ countries, and to use these mechanisms ruthlessly.

When you are sitting in the FCO or in an overseas Embassy, it does not look so straightforward.

First, it is not easy to identify the scope of any given policy, or how it is reconciled with other priorities.

Second, the instruments for exerting pressure are not always clear, or available.

Third, countries are good at ignoring what other countries say. If they do, is it really worth the effort to try to squeeze them?

Add to this the difficulties in clearing any British position through the jungle of committees within EU, UN, NATO, OSCE. Modern diplomacy is not about deft thrusts of a rapier, but instead pushing through thick mud. There are ways of having impact, even though some crises are ‘fashionable’, others not.

The diplomatic heavy lifting required to push through the Dayton settlement was one example. So was the Kosovo NATO intervention. Now we have the intervention against Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq. In every case no policy will be better than the analytical base it rests on. Take Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I attended a briefing before the 1984 Games by the BH Minister for Information. He implied that everything in Bosnia and Herzegovina was free, happy and wonderful. I was cheeky in those days. I asked him about the arrests of Izetbegović and other ‘clero-nationalists’. He was angry: “when you look at a rose do you see only the thorns?!”

If we had gathered all the diplomats in the world in Sarajevo’s Koševo Football Stadium in 1999 and asked each of them to write down all they knew about Bosnia and Herzegovina, how many could have filled a single page? How many understood the difference between Muslims and Muslims? How many knew about WW2 in Prijedor? Or about Alija Izetbegović and Vojislav Šešelj as political prisoners? Only a few diplomats could have filled that page. Many would have been Russians. On a good day I might have filled two pages.

Take Serbia. In 1983 Alexander Ranković died. He had not been mentioned in the SFRY media for years. “Politika” published a tiny note of his death. Tens of thousands of people turned up at his funeral. That was not mentioned in your media. Most Embassies in Belgrade never heard about it. We clever Brits heard only two days later.

Fitzroy Maclean visited Belgrade when I was here. Your TV did a documentary about him. We watched it at the Ambassador’s Residence. We could hear Fitzroy’s words in English, then the Serbian voice-over translation. Fitzroy told a true story about an Ustashe pilot who had betrayed German mission to the Partisans. Fitzroy said in English, “he was brave man – he knew that if he betrayed the mission he could be shot down and killed, as in fact happened”. Those words were omitted from the translation. The regime could not acknowledge a brave Ustashe person. Ranković, Goli Otok, informburists, Dobrica Ćosić’s ideas, Đilas and so on – all suppressed. There was no mechanism for investigating communist massacres after the war, or trying calmly to assess the Chetnik movement. The regime pulled a red cover over history, proclaimed “Bratstvo and Jedinstvo” and denounced people who wanted to open such issues as ‘anarcho-liberals’ or other enemies. This worked for years. The world knew and rather liked Communist Yugoslavia. We did not understand the complexities beneath the red sheet.

When SFRY started to break up we did not want you to fight. We would have been delighted had SFRY stayed together and emerged speedily and peacefully into a democratic European partner. But the disruptive policies of the various local leaderships in SFRY ruled that out.

The West struggled to come up with a coherent policy response. What might make sense and work? Was the parallel disintegration of the Soviet Union a good or bad model? Or was it best to negotiate a new arrangement within adjusted borders?

The echoes of the debates about where sensibly to end the dissolution of SFRY are alive today. Should Serbia and Montenegro stay together or not? Whose history deserves support: Whites, Greens or Reds?

What about Kosovo? In SFRY Kosovo like Vojvodina had most of the constitutional attributes of a republic. The world recognised Slovenia breaking away under a majority decision. Why not Kosovo too? If it is OK for an Albanian community to vote to leave a democratic Serbia, is it OK for Kosovo Serbs to vote to stay in it? Democracy has to decide. But which communities vote, and on what?

Historical situations and community dynamics differ markedly around this region. How to maintain minimum common-sense consistency so that no community feels cheated?

Many people dislike British attempts to answer these questions. Bosnian Muslims say we are anti-Muslim. The 'pro-Montenegro' tendency says HMG are anti-Montenegro. Many Croats insist the British are congenitally anti-Croat. Serbs say that the British must be anti-Serb: London inflicted Communism on us, bombed us in WW2, and again in 1999.

Lots of people across this region talk knowingly about the secret British Plan, cooked up at the Congress of Berlin, perfidiously unfolding down the decades. No one knows the Plan. This shows just how secret and perfidious it really is!

I have bad news for this region. I will be prosecuted under the British Official Secrets Act for telling you. The situation is much worse than us having a Secret Plan. We do not have a Plan. We have no Great Power interests or 'eternal friendships' at stake. But we do have voters. Our politicians respond to their concerns. Thousands on thousands of letters poured into the FCO from British people angry at the attack on Dubrovnik. The then Conservative Government responded to this by supporting tough sanctions against Belgrade.

Diplomacy traditionally is all about relations between states. We do not have a rule-book for relations between states and collapsing states or non-states. We do not have a blueprint for identifying where and how new borders should be drawn when states collapse. We do not have a handy catalogue in the Foreign Office for balancing Peace with Justice. Can you have Justice without Peace? Or Peace without Justice?

So we are operating on the Frontier of Policy in this region. This frontier is a uniquely difficult place for Europe. We don't have all the answers. This is why the EU and HMG want intelligent partnership with fair-minded people in Belgrade, Podgorica, Priština and other regional centres to tackle these existential problems through dialogue, not ethnic cleansing.

The Frontier of Practice

So much for Policy. What about the Frontier of Practice?

We do have a Vision. You inherited weak state structures. We want to help you strengthen your institutions. We want the new countries to join the EU and other Euro-Atlantic arrangements.

We now understand this region much better. But subtle analysis requires subtle practice. One reason why this region's problems are so professionally difficult is that we are trying to do things we have never done before.

Take crime. Organised crime across this region was organised by and for state structures for much of the 1990s. This gave it a real boost compared to other post-communist transitions. We want to help you pull out the poisoned arrows of war criminals and other criminals. Without this you can not move back fast to the European mainstream. The UK

government hosted the London Conference on Organised Crime late last year. When Vojislav Koštunica met Tony Blair in London in late 2001. They talked about organised crime. The Prime Minister said “this is important – Charles, write me a paper!” So I did.

My paper said that the organised crime problem was had to be at the heart of EU development strategy for the region. We needed to new policies to tackle it. I talked the other day to one of the American diplomats who wrote Dayton. (We agreed that back in the 1990s we had not understood the policy implications of organised crime.) He said “had I known that what I know now, Dayton would have been written differently – we had to take money back from criminal interests”. The British Government now have a good analytical insight into regional organised crime. We have plenty of reform initiatives, shared with you at the London event.

But to make a difference we need our own customs, police, banks, tax authorities, intelligence agencies, development experts and other parts of government cooperating smoothly and securely among themselves. They need to cooperate well with their EU/US/Russian and other counterparts. And above all with you.

This is not yet fully happening. As each day passes organised cigarette, drugs, people and other smugglers are drilling holes in your society. Teams of mobile, vicious, rich arsonists start more fires than even the best fire brigades can extinguish. These criminal groupings do not want you to be normal. A normal society is a strong society, run by democrats not criminals. They killed Zoran Đinđić to stop you becoming normal. They are still making threats to your leaders, and using the media to spread political poison.

Another policy frontier issue is war crimes. The Hague Tribunal is a major practical innovation in international jurisprudence.

What are war criminals? Criminals. This is why HMG have pushed the war crimes issue hard as well. We do not like to push. Much better if you solve this without pressure, in a spirit of partnership.

Belgrade has done a huge amount here in the past two years. Let’s finish the job and see Mladić and Karadžić answering for their policies too, rather than running round the region like nervous rabbits.

Some people see Mladić and Karadžić as true Serbian heroes. Is this Milošević’s ultimate insult to the Serbian people, destroying your very notion of heroism?

Belgrade is currently hosting a war crimes trial where the victims were a Kosovo Albanian family. Your fellow citizens, forced to flee your country. We have given them shelter in the UK. Last week the remaining members of that family came to testify. I met the children. They were nervous but cheerful. They have horrible scars.

The family were well looked after here by your government, inside and outside the courtroom. Congratulations to all involved. This shows what can be done with the right attitudes and right people.

Imagine how much better your reputation would be now if your leaders had visited the mass grave at Batajnica as soon as it was disclosed in 2001, invited the relatives of these people to Belgrade and expressed personal condolences to them.

I suggested this to President Koštunica’s office. A new mass grave had been found, only a couple of kilometres away. This was a European disaster. The President should respond. I got a negative reply: “there are so many mass graves in Belgrade from the Second World War – why should we make a fuss about this one?” You can imagine – or more likely you can’t – the impact this caused in London.

Despite these attitudes we have had strong, good partners here. The Serbian government work led by Nebojša Čović in managing the problems in Southern Serbia in 2001 was a first-class effort. He presented this plan to a group of sceptical Ambassadors back in early 2001. I told my colleagues that this was an historic moment. It was the first

time ever that Belgrade had put forward a calm, 'European' plan for improving relations between Serbs and Albanians, and asked for international partnership to move it along.

Tony Blair wrote privately to Milošević urging him in this direction for Kosovo. Milošević never replied. This nihilistic stupidity led Serbia to disaster in 1999. It is impossible to work with leaders determined to destroy their own people. I was there when Zoran Đinđić discussed Kosovo with Tony Blair in London. Our Prime Minister said that promoting stability was the key to the region. Zoran wittily replied: "stability – plus winning elections!" He said that we had to manage the Kosovo problem in a way which helped and supported democratic changes in Belgrade. Mr Blair agreed. That is a big plank in our approach.

In turn we expect Belgrade to take cooperative non-inflammatory positions on Kosovo. Taking forward these war crimes trials – by calling to account senior members of the security forces as well as lower level personnel – is important. Your media and politicians deciding to stop calling Albanians "Shiptars" wouldn't be a bad move.

Finally, a word on today's diplomatic technique.

Why did Milošević fall in 2000 and not 1996?

Milošević had two lies: "The world hates Serbs". And "I am the Serbs" only way back from international isolation.

We deliberately turned these round. We proclaimed that "the world likes Serbs but does not like Milošević". And we said "if you want to end international isolation, get rid of Milošević".

We pushed this message to the Serbia public. We supported democratic NGO media groups using e-mail and the Internet to get round state repression. Milošević did not understand. He planned to delay the election results for days while he manipulated the figures. But the Internet reported the true results within hours. The scale of Milošević's defeat was immediately obvious around Serbia and around the world.

Serbia mobilised to bring him down. Oct 5, 2000 saw the first ever Internet Revolution. We now use new technology to move policy forward. I stay in e-mail contact with Goran Svilanović and other leaders here, plus Chris Patten, Xavier Solana and Lord Ashdown. This is real-time policy dialogue and operational partnership.

Another Frontier issue. Doing things in ways never seen before.

The problem now is not the design of the information technology, but the design of us. Our productivity is going up exponentially. Our brains and the hours in the day are staying the same size.

The Frontier of Psychology

So much for the policy and practice of regional diplomacy in July 2003. What about the human factor, the Frontier of Psychology?

This is the hardest part. Diplomacy is about people. Modern diplomacy aims to involve people, to build consensus, to embrace NGOs, women's groups, charities, the media, virtual communities on the Internet and so on.

We are trying to operate on these new Frontiers. What if the people we want to work with are living somewhere else?

In calibrating our policy we need to take people as they are, not as we would like them to be.

Can we British understand your culture and approach to life? Can you understand us? What if we both get that wrong?

A huge problem is “Inat”. We do not have a word for “Inat”. Apart from English football hooligans British people don’t display “Inat”.

My best “Inat” example from Bosnia and Herzegovina. We hosted the 1996 London Conference a year after Dayton. We wanted the newly elected BH and Entity leaderships to be there. Three days before the conference we had problems. Izetbegović accused us of trying to destroy Dayton by inviting the Entities! Pale in turn refused to sit with a nameplate on the table saying “Bosnia and Herzegovina”. I went to Pale to meet Aleksa Buha. I told him that 60 Foreign Ministers would be attending this event – Karadžić’s SDS party and the Republika Srpska leadership could emerge from isolation and present their case to the world. But the nameplate issue was not negotiable. There had to be one BH delegation. Mr Buha is a distinguished scholar of Hegel. That makes any true Englishman suspicious. He insisted that without the nameplate being changed the RS delegation would not go. “Is it in your interests to go?” “Yes”. “So are you going to go?” “No”. “In that case your position is stupid”. “Serbs are stupid”.

I told him that I looked forward to seeing him in London on Tuesday. I went back to Sarajevo and called Mrs Plavšić to Banja Luka. I told her that I feared the Krajina Serb-isation of Republika Srpska. Serbs came across like people standing in the middle of a motorway complaining about speeding traffic. They had a good point. But they were dead.

She said she agreed. The RS delegation would go to London. They went. Mr Buha had dinner with Princess Anne.

Three other examples of attitudes we find incomprehensible:

- President Zubak, Croat member of the BH Presidency told me how he had offered Mr Krajišnik a deal. The Croats in would be nicer to the small Serb community in W Mostar if the Banja Luka Serbs would be nicer to the small Croat community there. Mr Krajišnik said, “any Serbs living in W Mostar are bad Serbs. Kick them out!”.
- A close friend of Izetbegović assured me that Muslims could never be welcome in Europe – the ring of yellow European stars symbolised the halo around the heads of Christian saints.
- When Robin Cook visited Podgorica in 2001 Mr Đukanović’s government were unhappy that he was ready to see FRY PM Žižić. So the motorcade drove into Podgorica really slowly. They used other unprofessional clumsy tactics to waste time and so squeeze this meeting from the programme. The Montenegrin side looked ridiculous. Robin simply delayed his departure.

Every exhausting minute your international friends spend arguing over stubbornness and prejudices is a minute diverted from doing something useful. The costs to your people of these delays accumulate alarmingly.

New investments don’t happen. People die because of badly maintained roads and inadequate hospitals. They are killed by political negligence and irresponsibility. Or they emigrate. Your very population erodes.

“Inat” attitudes flourish because people are unhappy and insecure.

President Izetbegović once said to me, “there are only two million or so Bosniacs surrounded by some 13 million Serbs and Croats. We have no margin of error. There can be no ethnic disarmament for 50 years!”

My main departing presentation in Sarajevo in 1998 tackled this issue of “ethnic disarmament”. Copies are available here of that speech for anyone who wants one.

Take Mitrovica. In N Mitrovica is a tiny enclave of Kosovo Albanians. They feel insecure surrounded by a local majority Serb population. That Serb population feels insecure surrounded by a majority Kosovo population. The Kosovo Albanian population feels insecure because of the legacy of Milošević in Serbia. And the population of Serbia feels demoralised and defeated after all the terrible events of the 1990s, with hundreds of thousands of people displaced back into Serbia from Kosovo and across the region.

Rings within rings within rings of insecurity. People within these rings are prey to manipulation. Extremists Backed by criminal money exploit this. They need social insecurity and weak institutions to keep smuggling going.

What are the policy implications of this?

In Iraq, in Chechnya or in former Yugoslavia there is no quick way to make people feel safe after decades of insecurity. This requires strong, steady leadership by you in partnership with your friends, matched by determined action against criminal extremists. It makes no sense to nurture the green shoots of hope while criminals spread toxic waste on them.

The European agenda is the best way to accelerate this slow process.

My very last words with Zoran Đinđić were at President Marović's inauguration. Zoran said that Serbia would press on with EU reforms because they were in Serbia's own interest. When they were completed Serbia would decide whether to join the EU: "maybe we will, maybe we won't!"

The speed of progress is really up to you. So is the destination.

I sometimes get the impression that Belgrade imagines it can pass all its EU reforms in one massive surge the day before EU entry, then sit with a big smile asking for its reward. Sorry, it does not work like that. It is a long, dull job. Start it today.

But we Europeans also have to be smart. There are what I call the Three Challenges of Europeanisation:

- Europeanisation takes time and patience. Europeans are good at that. It works only if we also have sharp, short-term policies for tackling criminal and other extremists. It makes no sense to nurture the green shoots of hope while criminals spread toxic waste on them. We are not yet good at that.
- Europeanisation is intended to build up state capacity. But without pretty strong state structures and discipline it is not easy to pass all the EU requirements and make them work. Chicken and egg problems here.
- Some people in Europe say that 'borders do not matter so much these days'. But borders in the EU only look 'soft'. In fact they are supported by strong democratic legal systems across the whole space. We want normal people to move freely and easily. We want smuggled goods and the criminals organising them to be caught. A tricky balance.

Conclusion

These are the Frontiers of Diplomacy, where my Embassy team and I supported by a first-class Department in London have been working since Milošević fell.

Milošević turned your country's back on us. Look how much we, you and our European and North American and Japanese and other Mends have achieved together since he was thrown out of office only 145 weeks ago:

- Inflation is low
- Pensions are paid on time
- The lights stay on
- Key criminals are in prison in The Hague and here
- You have achieved a world-class conflict prevention process in Southern Serbia

- You are in the Council of Europe
- You are getting close to PFP
- An EU Feasibility Study is being launched
- Prevlaka is largely solved; borders with Croatia are far easier
- Belgrade and Podgorica are talking to each other
- Belgrade and Tirana and Zagreb and Sarajevo are all talking to each other
- Belgrade and Priština are getting ready to talk to each other
- A superb new British Council centre has been built, one of the best in the world
- You have outstanding basketball, handball and water polo teams. You need to work on football a bit.

Of course tough problems remain:

- Hundreds of thousands of Serbs can not yet return to their homes in Croatia and Kosovo -Serbs in Kosovo feel insecure
- Mladić and Karadžić and other criminals are still poisoning you, and your relations with Europe
- The economy is not getting enough foreign investment
- The media are free but in some cases poisoned and irresponsible
- You have an image problem, but you don't seem to realise it.

Let's move on and tackle these together:

Modern European political cycles are different to yours. It is easy for London and other EU capitals to get impatient at the pace of reforms here. The balance between impatience and realism is never right.

But the British Government realise that we and you need that balance. You may think we don't have the balance right on Kosovo, The Hague and other sensitive problems, I assure you it is not for lack of trying.

The British Government will make not always get it right. In earlier decades we have not always taken decisions which you wanted or supported.

But your British friends sincerely want to work with you as full, equal partners in the European family.

We should be close partners in international efforts to tackle poverty and terrorism. Our soldiers should be standing together in peacekeeping missions.

We need reliable, energetic partners here to make this happen. We need good people here who fight problems, not fight each other.

The loss of Zoran Đinđić was a tragedy. As my telegram to London said the day after he was murdered, Zoran was “a Serb hero, a European friend”. I dedicate this presentation to Ružica, Jovana and Luka.